

What IS Behavior Consulting, Really?

A Guide for Trainers

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Over the past few years, I've added behavior consulting to my list of services. I found during this journey that it took me quite a while to really understand what "behavior consulting" *was* and to know when it was appropriate to begin referring to my services as "behavior consulting." More recently, as the secretary of the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants (IAABC), I've worked with the rest of the board to craft definitions and explanations that are clear and concise for the IAABC website and printed materials. My hope is that this article can provide fellow trainers with a greater understanding of the role of the behavior consultant, so the two might work better together to match the appropriate service to clients, and so that trainers who wish to do so might more efficiently branch into the behavior consulting field. Essentially, my goal is to make it easier for you than it was for me to gain this understanding.

The process of teaching an animal to sit on cue is clearly *training*. In contrast, an ongoing process of working with a client to address an animal's dysfunctional separation phobia over the course of several months is clearly *behavior consulting*.

But what about when things are less clear? Anyone who has taught basic obedience classes for any length of time has been presented with an array of behavior issues of varying severity — and is likely to have resolved quite a few. Consider the following situations:

Situation 1: A student in a group basic obedience class has a dog who is chasing and growling at the new family cat, and they are deeply concerned for the cat's safety. The dog professional takes time after class to provide advice to the student, and the student reports back that they followed this advice to successfully resolve the problem. *Is this behavior consulting?*

Situation 2: A dog professional sees a client who reports that their dog is acting "aggressively" when visitors arrive at the door. The professional takes a detailed history, observes the dog, and finds that the dog is over-stimulated by the excitement of the guests' arrival, with no aggressive intent toward the visitors. The professional writes out a detailed plan, but essentially the main objective is to teach the dog a simple alternate go-to-mat behavior at the sound of the doorbell. *Is this behavior consulting?*

The lines may never be completely clear, because behavior consultants use basic, sound training to resolve cases — and trainers often help owners resolve serious problem behaviors.

While there is certainly overlap between training and behavior consulting, two factors are indicative of behavior consulting:

- 1) The type of issue being addressed by the professional.
- 2) The manner in which the professional addresses the issue.

Key Identifier #1: The type of issue being addressed by the professional generally involves dysfunctional or abnormal behavior.

A qualified behavior consultant will more often address dysfunctional or abnormal behaviors. These are different from normal behaviors that become problematic for owners such as digging, pulling on leash, and barking. These dysfunctional or abnormal behaviors might include: fears, phobias, anxiety, aggression, and separation issues. Behavior consultants may also be called upon in cases where an animal is performing behaviors that are usually considered normal for that species, but with such frequency or intensity that they interfere with the animal's normal functioning and/or are creating serious safety issues for people or animals in the family.

A qualified behavior consultant will have experience resolving a wide array of the issues listed above — often all of them. Behavior consultants may choose to refer out certain types of cases, or specialize in others — but in general, a behavior consultant should have a comprehensive knowledge of both normal and dysfunctional behaviors that occur in the species s/he works with. Behavior consultants also generally maintain a network of colleagues, and will consult with others on a particularly complex case, or refer cases to veterinarians or veterinary behaviorists who have the added ability to prescribe medication when needed.

Along with an understanding of basic learning theory and operant conditioning training skills, behavior consultants also utilize behavior modification to not only change an animal's behavioral response in a situation (their actions), but to also treat the underlying

emotional state of the animal to alter the animal's conditioned emotional response. Desensitization and counterconditioning techniques are required and often used "tools of the trade."

For me, the book *Clinical Behavioral Medicine for Small Animals* by Karen Overall, VMD has been the reference that gave me the best and most comprehensive overview of these issues and strategies.

Key identifier #2: The manner in which the professional addresses the issue involves a structured approach, detailed recordkeeping, and a strong relationship with the human client(s).

As compared to offering private or group training, behavior consulting involves a lot more paperwork and calls for more refined interpersonal skills — including family dynamics as well as drawing often on a network of other professionals. Behavior consultants use a detailed process with specific structures, records, and activities that are conducted for each case. They must also deal with human behavior, in order to develop and leverage a close working relationship with their clients.

A typical behavior consulting format includes:

- *Detailed intake forms or questionnaires:* These are most often filled out by the client and reviewed by the consultant prior to the initial consult. In addition to collecting data useful to resolving the case, the consultant will also identify any cases he or she does not feel confident in handling, and instead provide a referral to the client.
- *Initial consult:* During the initial session, the consultant uses the intake form and well-developed personal interviewing skills to gain a deep understanding of the animal's background and current situation, to include: behavioral history, environment, socialization, genetics, diet, health and wellness, family dynamics of all humans and animals involved, previous training, and socialization. Consultants also help clients set realistic goals and prioritize issues. Typically, an initial consult may last an hour or more, and there may not be any hands-on work done with the animal during this session at all. The main goal for this session is to gain an understanding of the case that will allow the consultant to outline an effective plan.
- *A deep working relationship with the human client(s):* Behavior consulting cases often involve heightened emotions, which each human family member may experience and react to differently. Consultants may need to address human fears, as well as deep-seated beliefs (valid or not), in order to bring about resolution of a case. Consultants may assist their clients in dealing with feared or actual injury to humans and other pets, with the prospect of rehoming or euthanasia, and with resolving any conflicts among family members that would be an obstacle to resolution of the case.

- *Structured follow-up:* This may include a combination of scheduled consults, telephone or written follow-up, written reports given to the clients and/or their veterinarian, and written plans for training, management, behavior modification, and other recommendations.
- *Recordkeeping:* In behavior consultation, detailed recordkeeping is critical, both for liability reasons and to better serve the client by being able to refer to previous observations and recommendations, and charting results over time.
- *Referral:* As appropriate, the consultant may refer the client to a veterinarian, veterinary behaviorist, or other animal professional for further consultation and/or pharmacological intervention. Often the consultant continues to take the lead with the client, uniting the efforts of all entities.

A qualified behavior consultant will do most or all of the above throughout his or her work on each case, taking a structured approach from start to finish, and maintaining detailed records. Behavior consultants must build a strong relationship with their human clients, and be prepared with exceptional interpersonal skills to deal with delicate and emotional matters. As trainers, we may joke that we remember the dogs' names in class long before the humans' names — when working as a behavior consultant, the opposite is likely to be true.

I found Nicole Wilde's *One on One: a Dog Trainer's Guide to Private Training and Getting a Grip on Aggression Cases: Practical Considerations for Dog Trainers* to be excellent resources for building my skills in structuring effective, safe consultation services and the required paperwork — and for guidance in determining which cases I felt competent to handle.

Conclusion:

Often in the course of behavior consulting, the consultant's work will involve training the animal. It is the addition of other factors to this training that will identify a process as behavior consulting.

If we look back to our examples from the beginning of this article, it is clear that situation #1 is not behavior consulting. While problematic, the dog's behavior toward the family cat is not necessarily abnormal behavior for a dog newly introduced to a cat — more detailed history taking and/or observation might have more conclusively assessed the situation as well as uncovered any potentially more serious issues. While the professional's advice helped the client resolve the problem, the professional's methods did not include any of the hallmarks that might identify the consulting process, such as history-taking and structured follow up. The professional's advice was effective, but would not be appropriately classified as behavior consulting.

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Situation #2 is behavior consulting. While the solution's main effort was a training exercise of a simple go-to-mat behavior, the professional's handling of the case involved detailed history-taking and observation. This allowed the professional to more confidently assess the situation to select an appropriate plan from a host of choices for dealing with similar behaviors in response to visitors, not all of which would have been appropriate or warranted in this particular case.

Frank and Spot: an example of training and behavior consulting services

Here's an example of an issue a client may bring to your attention, and how it might be addressed differently by training and behavior consulting services:

A client named Frank shows up for a group basic obedience class, accompanied by an adolescent male Beagle mix named Spot. Spot is fearful of new people and new experiences (but not to such an extent that it would be inappropriate to continue in group class).

Frank and Spot clearly have some individual needs, and Spot has a behavior-related issue that both Frank and Spot would benefit from working on. The two might be well-served by continuing the group class (with possible minor modifications), with private behavior consultation, or with a combination of both.

As a trainer, you might:

- Use visual barriers and/or distance to ensure a comfortable learning environment for Spot.
- Alter exercises or criteria as appropriate to adjust to Spot's individual learning needs and abilities, and provide a brief explanation to Frank about this after class.
- Use your skills to build your own relationship with Spot, gradually working toward Spot feeling comfortable with you approaching and petting him.
- Explain what you're doing to Frank, so that he might help others to greet Spot in this way.
- Provide Frank with a handout or other references about fearful behavior in dogs.
- Refer Frank to private behavior consultation — either setting a private appointment yourself if you provide these services, or referring to a trusted behavior consultant or behaviorist.

A behavior consultant would also:

- Take a detailed history to learn what environmental, health, or other factors might need to be addressed. Look for any indications of a possible underlying medical problem, and if so, refer Spot to a veterinarian. Meet with Frank's wife Sue and daughters Sara and Jenny. Become familiar with Spot's home environment and routines, and interview all of Spot's family members to use each of their observations to become

more deeply familiar with Spot's behavior in various environments and situations.

- Help the family set realistic goals for improvement and to prioritize among multiple goals. Provide them with a basic understanding of the work and time involved in working toward these goals (*without* providing any "guarantees" of results).
- Address Sue's questions, and those of the rest of the family, about why Spot acts like this. Whether or not a determination of cause is needed to help Spot, it may be very important to address their concerns and desire for an explanation in order to help them commit to the behavior modification plan. The behavior consultant may need to address incorrect assumptions or beliefs on the part of one or more family members, and provide persuasive explanation — without alienating any or all family members — to help them embrace a more accurate interpretation.
- Assess the best way for the family to learn what they need to know in order to put Spot's behavior modification plan into action. Help each family member to be part of a cohesive effort, determining what role each will play and ensuring each family member is on the same page. Determine how best to convey the concept of remedial socialization to the family, and whether this is different for different family members. For instance, Frank and high school senior Sara may appreciate and benefit from a detailed explanation of the concepts of desensitization and counterconditioning, while the rest of the family would be better served by learning a series of exercises that are rooted in desensitization and counterconditioning but without the detailed explanation of the science. Youngest daughter Jenny may not yet handle or train the dog in public situations, but will participate in the management plan.
- Develop an individual behavior modification plan for Spot. This plan will likely include all of the following: management, equipment, specific exercises, and the tracking of training activities and progress. It may also include recommendations for Spot's health, nutrition, exercise, enrichment, home environment, and routines.
- Plan follow-up via phone or email as well as future in-person sessions. The behavior consultant may field an emotional phone call when Spot has an embarrassing setback when the in-laws come to visit, and the consultant must be ready to provide empathy, coaching, and encouragement to help the family remain committed to the plan and confident in its worth. For the most part, the trainer's role ends when a client completes a class or package of lessons; the behavior consultant's role does not end until the case is resolved to the satisfaction of the client.

In this situation, Spot's behavior would likely be improved to some extent by the group class alone, if

the trainer takes the steps above. Spot's behavior may improve more, or more quickly, with the addition of behavior consulting services. The family may find valuable the additional insights or peace of mind gained from the more comprehensive and individual nature of behavior consultation.

To a large extent, it is up to Frank and his family to decide which services they wish to pursue — but we as dog professionals can help clients understand what these services are, and what they can expect from them. In the case of behavior problems that are more severe than Spot's, and/or that involve danger to any person or animal, it is our responsibility to connect the client with an appropriate behavior professional if they are outside the scope of our regular training services.

Why Refer to a Behavior Consultant?

At times, even if a trainer can offer solid advice to the client on an issue, there are several reasons that a trainer might refer someone to a behavior consultant, or a client might be better served by the service of behavior consulting:

- 1) The more structured approach is more likely to uncover any history, environment or health issues that may be contributing to the problem.
- 2) Due to a more comprehensive knowledge base in dysfunctional behavior, the behavior consultant may be more likely to be able to identify specific disorders or issues that require the dog to be seen by a veterinarian, or benefit from specific behavior modification protocols.
- 3) Behavior consultants are "specialists" in dysfunctional behavior, and more used to seeing and successfully addressing severe behavior problems.
- 4) Taking on a case for which one is not sufficiently prepared raises issues both of ethics and liability, so erring on the side of caution is advisable. Offering an offhand "tip" for a serious behavioral issue without suggesting a referral may delay the client from getting more comprehensive assistance, and may prolong an unsafe situation.

Transitioning from Training to Behavior Consulting.

First, determine whether this is something you'd really like to do:

- Am I qualified? Or alternately, do I want to do what it takes to acquire the additional knowledge of animal behavior, behavior modification techniques, and the paperwork involved in the consulting process?
- Do I want to commit to a more structured approach?
- Do I want to work with these types of cases, including some very severe and potentially dangerous behavior? Behavior consulting brings with it a good dose of the "dark side" of human/animal relationships.

- Am I ready and willing to leverage my people skills to work with clients in cases that can be very emotional and have a lot at stake?

Then, begin to acquire specialized knowledge and experience, and consider pursuing certification. There is no set path, and there are as many ways to become a competent behavior consultant as there are to become a competent trainer.

Various organizations provide certification in the field of behavior consulting:

- **State Veterinary Boards** certify *Certified Veterinary Behaviorists*. These professionals are veterinarians who specialize in behavior.
- **The Animal Behavior Society** certifies *Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists (CAAB)* and *Associate Applied Animal Behaviorists (ACAAB)*. These professionals combine experience with advanced degrees in the field of behavior.
- **The International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants (IAABC)** certifies *Certified Dog Behavior Consultants (CDBC)* and *Associate Certified Dog Behavior Consultants (ACDBC)*, as well as cat, parrot, and horse behavior consultants. These professionals combine experience with completion of a peer-reviewed application submission and case studies. The associate certification is specifically intended for consultants who may have less consulting experience but who demonstrate professional competency in the field of behavior consulting.
- **The Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers (CCPDT)** certifies *Certified Behavior Consultants Canine - Knowledge Assessed (CBCC-KA)*. These professionals combine experience with the completion of a rigorous examination of behavior consulting knowledge. In the future, CBCC-KSA (knowledge and skills assessed) certification will also be offered.

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